

A large crowd of refugees, including men, women, and children, is seen in a desert landscape. They are carrying belongings and some are using blankets for shelter. The scene is set in a dry, hilly area with a clear sky.

BOOK SECTION

NOWHERE TO HIDE

BY SUSAN FRANCIS WITH
ANDREW CROFTS

Life had not always been easy for Susan Francis, an Englishwoman married to an Iraqi and living in Baghdad. But nothing had prepared her for the nightmare she faced when she and some of her family — including four small grandchildren — fled north to escape the devastating Allied air raids during the Gulf War. In the rugged mountains where they had once spent happy holidays, they found themselves caught up in Saddam Hussein's violent persecution of the Kurds. Almost certainly the only Briton among the thousands fleeing Saddam's soldiers and helicopter gunships, Susan fought indomitably for her family's survival in the midst of unimagined horrors. The story of her ordeal in the killing fields of Kurdistan is one of inspiring courage and heart-wrenching determination at the brink of death.

ALL SEEMED lost. We were desperate to make it to the Iranian border — and safety. But after a week in this vast refugee column, winding through the mountains of northern Iraq, it looked as if my husband, Azziz, and I would die slow, agonizing deaths, our young grandsons in our arms.

If only we hadn't exchanged the horrors of one war for those of another; if only, when we fled from the Gulf War air raids on Baghdad, we hadn't come to this homeland of the Kurds and got ourselves trapped in their latest fight for independence from Iraq. Now, a month after the Gulf War had ended, Saddam Hussein was out to crush them.

There were tales of his soldiers marching unstopably after the refugee column, torturing and killing everyone who turned back, wiping out towns and villages as they came. Perched on the mountainside, we were easy targets for Saddam's helicopter gunships.

On the morning of April 4, 1991, after yet another night sleepless with worry, I got out of our car, leaving Azziz slumped over the wheel and the children still asleep in the back. Hunger and thirst gnawed at my insides. I hadn't eaten anything nourishing for days. With barely the

Susan Francis and names of members of her family are pseudonyms, to protect relatives still in Iraq. Some personal details have also been changed.

strength to stand, I wandered around.

Everywhere I looked there were people huddled in grey heaps in the mud, trying to shelter from the steady rain and cold wind under piles of blankets. Life seemed to be ebbing away from the entire crowd. Some families no longer had the energy to bury their dead, simply leaving them where they perished in their sleep.

In normal times, the 120-kilometre drive from Sulaymaniyah where we had been staying, through the mountains to the border with Iran, would have taken about two hours. But now progress was nightmarishly slow. The long, pathetic procession, in addition to the hundreds of thousands on foot, contained every sort of transport imaginable, from cars and lorries to dust-carts, combine harvesters, donkeys, mules — anything that had wheels or legs and some form of propulsion, all loaded high with baggage.

Sometimes we edged forward only a couple of metres in an hour. During the whole week we had covered merely 110 kilometres. "And," as Azziz had said despairingly, "we are nowhere near the border."

The Iranians, faced with such a huge migration, were finding it difficult to cope. A massive tailback was building up, and the column had come to a virtual standstill.

Until a few weeks ago I had

been the centre of a large happy family. Now, as far as I knew, our home in Baghdad had been destroyed by Allied bombs. Our two sons in the Iraqi army, our daughter and all our in-laws were probably dead. I was a husk of my former self.

I had no pride left. As I walked through the crowd, I watched out of the corner of my eye for anyone with anything I could beg to eat or drink. Noticing a woman crouched over a pot, making tea on a small fire built from a few sticks, which she was managing to keep going despite the rain, I shuffled over to her.

"May I have a glass of that?" I asked. "It is my thirty-seventh wedding anniversary today."

I waited for her response. Some of the Kurds had shouted insults or spat at me for being English. The woman stood up, thin and bent with weariness; she was probably only in her thirties but looked twice that age. She stared at me, her expression at first hostile at the sight of my pale skin and blonde hair, which identified me as a Westerner. Then tears welled up in her eyes and she put her arms out. "Oh, you poor creature!"

She hugged me, and we both began to cry.

After the drink of tea I went back to the car. Azziz and our grandchildren were still asleep, too feeble to rouse themselves. I cuddled Azziz, thinking he was going

to die within a few hours — death tearing us apart when we needed each other most, when we had arrived in hell together. The prospect was unbearable.

An Outcast

EVERYONE warned me against marrying a man from such a different culture. When I told my mother that my boyfriend and lover was Azziz Khaled, an Iraqi sent to Britain by his government to qualify in engineering at Southampton University, she was beside herself. "How can you marry an Arab?" she shouted. "People will look at us!"

The nurses' home in Southampton, where I lived as a student, forbade me to invite him to staff dances. And when I said to the vicar of the local church near my mother's house that I wanted to marry a Muslim, he replied, "Not in this church, young lady."

Azziz was very good-looking, with huge, liquid brown eyes, a clear olive-coloured skin and a strong face which was always creased up in a smile. He was also kind and thoughtful; I knew instinctively he was a man worth fighting for. Even Mum, when they actually met, was instantly won over by his good manners and charm. When we were married in 1954 (after the registrar had postponed the wedding for a month, saying: "I very much hope you will change your mind"), I felt I had a real catch.

Although Iraq, once a British mandated territory, had been independent since 1932, British expatriates were still running the country. They were supposed to be training Iraqis to take over, but they seemed reluctant to give up the best jobs and had a habit of stopping Iraqi students from qualifying by recalling them early. So in 1956 Azziz, then aged 24 and about to sit for his exams, was ordered home.

"You can't go with him," Mum insisted to me. "It's uncivilized. They could kill you and bury you in the desert, and no one will ever know."

Iraq, in fact, is the cradle of some of the earliest civilizations — Ur, Nineveh and Babylon. It is the scene of some of the exotic tales in *The Thousand and One Nights*. I was 22. I saw the trip as fun; an adventure to share with our one-year-old son John.

My first shock was cultural. The home of his brother Ahmad in Basrah, southern Iraq, where we were due to stay until we had a place of our own, turned out to be a hovel made of wattle. Rabid wild dogs scavenged among the rubbish in the unmade road outside and everything smelled of cow dung. "The women mix it with straw and mud," explained Azziz, "then dry the pats in the sun and use them as fuel to bake bread."

My second shock was rejection by Azziz's relatives. Now it was my turn to be hurt by prejudice. The

four old women shrouded in black who met us at Ahmad's house completely ignored me. To them, any Western woman was a *ja-habab* (prostitute).

I sensed their hatred burning into me constantly. At supper one evening the woman who loathed me the most gave me a slice of fish and made a gesture with her hands which I assumed to mean *bon appétit*. Later I discovered that she wished me a speedy death.

Soon after the meal I started to vomit. Pain seared through my body. Azziz, frightened, called a doctor who pumped out my stomach. "You nearly died," she said. "It was arsenic poisoning. I have seen it before, in circumstances very like yours."

Mum's warning, "They could kill you," rang in my ears. Many other foreign wives trying to get accepted by Iraqi families gave up the struggle and went home, but I refused to be beaten. I believe marriage is a commitment which must be honoured. I had promised to stay with Azziz and could not allow other people to make me go back on my word.

One of Azziz's uncles let us have a self-contained flat at the top of his house. It was hard work climbing the stairs with John, who was growing into a heavy toddler, but worth it to be on our own. I was pregnant with our second baby, April, when Azziz came home one evening with the news

that he had managed to get a job in a government civil-engineering office, building roads and bridges.

As the months passed I learned to speak Arabic fluently. I took care always to dress respectably in fully covered local attire when visiting mosques. I gave birth to our third baby, Peter, with the same ease as Arab women, getting up straight afterwards and cooking the dinner.

Life in those days was peaceful under the rule of King Faisal II, a member of the Hashemite dynasty installed in Iraq by the British. Food was plentiful, though I had to budget very carefully. For the first six years I wasn't able to buy myself a pair of shoes; it was 12 years before we could afford luxuries like butter. To get wool to knit children's clothes, I used to unravel my old jumpers.

It's hard being poor, but I was happy. We were given a new flat with a spacious garden, and we had a growing band of friends as Azziz's university friends returned to Iraq with their British wives. We women were always in one another's houses, or walking with the children in the cool evenings. Together we shared the births of our babies and helped each other to learn to cook and sew.

Much to my regret, I hadn't finished my nursing training in England, but my medical knowledge became my means of forming an alliance with Azziz's family. His female relatives started coming to me

for advice. I injected the drugs they got from the chemists, often cutting down dangerously high dosages; many Iraqis believe that the more medicine you take the better.

Although I enjoyed my role as an unpaid medical adviser, I decided that to earn a living in the future I would have to give myself some skills. Azziz managed to borrow an office typewriter for me and I sent off for a correspondence course in shorthand and typing with a certificate at the end. I felt I was starting to gain some control over my life again.

I was happy to find myself pregnant for a fourth time. Then, one terrible day in my seventh month I started to haemorrhage and realized I was losing the baby. My doctor advised me to go to the hospital so that she could take out fibroids.

"You don't have any choice," she said firmly, "unless you want to bleed to death."

I stood in the doorway of my hospital room staring in horror. Brown rivulets of dirt ran down the walls. I opened the lavatory door and rats the size of cats scurried away through the filth. In the operating theatre, simply a bench covered with a brown rubber sheet, the anaesthetist, a Russian woman, jabbed me five times with a syringe before she found a vein and managed to put me out.

Four hours afterwards I woke up, writhing in pain, and asked the doctor what had happened to

my baby. She said I wasn't to worry; the hospital would take care of all that. Later I was told that dead babies were simply dumped in the rubbish.

IN THE early 1960s, Iraqis at last had access to the better jobs. King Faisal had been assassinated, and General Abdul Al Karim Qassem had become Iraq's new leader, with expatriates being sent home to chants of "Throw out the Brits!" Under the new regime, the people seemed to prosper. But that affluence came at a political price. By the mid-1960s we were officially enjoying a socialist government, but that began to involve such practices as persuading children to inform to the authorities if their parents did not toe the line. It smacked of the Nazi tactics in 1930s Germany.

But we grew used to the unsettled political scene and paid it little attention. By the mid-1970s I had been in Iraq for 20 years and we finally had enough money coming in. Once my younger son Peter was 12, I found myself a job with a South American company building a power station locally. Our savings grew at a surprising rate and soon we were able to buy a car.

Reign of Fear

ON JULY 16, 1979, Saddam Hussein, a leading light of the Ba'ath party which had been running Iraq since a military coup in

1968, became president. Iraqis call that date *thaka yaum aswad* — a black day.

Soon Azziz was moved from Basrah to Baghdad, where the major government building decisions were made. At the time of the move, he was due to go to America for six months, and we ended up living in a cramped shack, with all the furniture I had lovingly collected in Basrah stored on the roof, where it was ruined by the sun and rain.

When Azziz returned from the United States, I asked him to build us a house, but he did nothing. He was busy with his job, and he wanted to relax and pass some time with the other men. I realized I had to make a stand, so I packed up the children and we all went to England. "The day you start building us a proper house," I told Azziz, "we will come back to you."

For six months we stayed in England, living with relatives. Every week Azziz rang to ask me to go back, but I knew that unless I stuck to my guns our lives would never get any better. I prayed that he was missing us as much as I was missing him.

Finally Azziz gave in. "Come back please, Susan," he pleaded. "I have bought the land, and we will draw up plans for a house." I was so relieved I just sat there and wept.

So we resumed our lives in Iraq. Azziz was finally earning good money, as was I with a job as a

secretary with an oil company. Before long we had built a fine house in the city centre with a garden. I filled the garden with flowers, and in the summer the sunflowers grew taller than the people.

Then in September 1980 Iraq invaded Iran, hoping to seize control of the Shatt-al-Arab waterway leading into the Persian Gulf. This would give the almost entirely land-locked country desirable and secure access to the sea.

Iranian bombs and rockets rained down on Baghdad, sometimes shaking our house, the noise never stopping for more than a few hours at a time, making me jump whether I was awake or asleep. The attacks went on throughout the eight years of the war, but the first six months were the worst. Eventually we became strangely hardened to the explosions, even though each one could wipe out a whole street.

Saddam Hussein had turned Iraq into a police state. Our doorbell was always ringing and Ba'ath Party men would shout questions like "Where is your husband?" "Where are your sons?" "Why do you not join the party?" I always replied that I had no idea where the men were and we knew nothing about politics. We then devised a coded ring on the doorbell which only the family knew; if the bell rang in any other way we didn't answer it. We already had a high wall in front of the house. To stop

anyone from peering through the gates, Azziz panelled them with steel plates.

Other Ba'ath Party officials roamed the streets, dragging men off buses, swooping on boys playing, and pushing them into lorries bound for army camps. Those who refused to board the lorries were shot on the spot for treachery. Our John was called up. Then Peter, too, was press-ganged into army service. Azziz, who was in his fifties, greying and obviously past military age, was ordered to drive out into the desert, help collect the coffins of dead Iraqi soldiers and deliver them, on the roof-rack of our car, to their grieving families. He would come back in tears with

stories of the distress his missions had caused. The stench of rotting flesh clung to his clothes.

I, as a foreign wife, was told to take Iraqi nationality or go home. Friends asked why I didn't return to England. I always replied: "Iraq is my home."

To escape the rockets, we decided after several years of war to visit the remote and beautiful mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, about 300 kilometres north of Baghdad, where we had spent several holidays. We invited April to come with us with Majid (her son by her first marriage), her new Kurdish husband Hilall and their two little sons Ali and his baby brother Hosni.

We visited Rawandiz, one of the highest points in Iraqi Kurdistan, where a cave holds a pool of water so pure you could drink straight



from it. Makeshift coffee houses set up under canvas sold hot, spicy food, rice and meats cooked over charcoal burners. After lunch we were enjoying a walk in a public garden when I muttered to Azziz: "I feel we are being watched."

We rounded a corner and suddenly came face to face with several hundred Kurdish warriors, all in dirty brown clothes and head-dresses, lolling in the sun, their guns beside them, knives in their belts and chests crossed with ammunition. Scores of eyes, unsmiling, hungry, angry and suspicious, bored into us.

We couldn't stop Majid running up to them, dragging little Ali by the hand. Majid asked to see one soldier's gun. The soldier gave not a flicker of response.

Silence seemed to descend over the whole mountainside. We stood frozen to the spot under the barrage of malevolent stares. Hilall, plump, ever jovial, and able to speak Kurdish, defused the tension. He spoke to the soldier, retrieved the children and whispered to us in English: "Get back to the cars — quickly."

A few kilometres down the road, Hilall pulled over and came back to our car to explain: "They were Kurdish mercenaries, hired by the Iraqi government and just back from fighting in Iran.

The soldier said they don't like tourists gaping at them and won't hesitate to kill."

In 1988 the war ended in stalemate, but we soon began to hear rumours that Saddam Hussein was planning another conflict. Then on December 31, 1989, my Scandinavian boss, Ole, invited us to his New Year's Eve party. Towards the end of the evening I was standing on my own, looking out of the window at the city lights, when he came over to chat to me. "May I give you some advice, Susan? Pack up and get out of Iraq for a while."

"Why?"

"There is talk of a war against Kuwait, and the international repercussions will be enormous. It might even lead to a nuclear strike against Baghdad."

This was the first time that anyone with inside knowledge had put my fears into words. I felt my blood run cold. "How can I leave? My sons are in the army and I have to look after their wives and children, and my daughter is also an Iraqi."

I thought deeply about what he had said, and talked to Azziz, who agreed we were in danger. But it would have been impossible to get the whole family out, and Azziz and I had no intention of running for safety, leaving them behind.

This time I was going to be ready for war. I stocked up on dried foodstuffs and distributed my more valuable possessions around the homes of Iraqi friends and relatives. I drew out the equivalent of several thousand pounds from the bank and put it in a bag in the

wardrobe, so that we would have money for food and shelter if we had to leave Baghdad.

Friends who were now safely out of Iraq encouraged us to look for ways to escape before it was too late. I was becoming frantic with worry and often cried myself to sleep as I thought of what might happen to my family and my adopted country.

On August 3, 1990, we were awakened by the blare of loudspeakers all over Baghdad, joyfully announcing that Iraq had invaded Kuwait the previous day. Many Iraqis approved of the invasion; Iraq had finally acquired a seaport on the Gulf. But most of us prayed that the Allies would assassinate Saddam Hussein.

During the five months before the Allied deadline for withdrawal expired, and while we waited for the "mother of all battles" promised by Saddam, Baghdad emptied and became a ghost city. Army camps encircled it. On January 16, 1991, a friend in Basrah telephoned us. "Leave now," she said. "The Allies are going to attack."

Azziz and I loaded the car with as many provisions as we could fit in, bedding, a paraffin stove and a suitcase full of cash. We checked that our house was firmly bolted and shuttered, then set off for April and Hilall's house in one of the suburbs, which had been designated a safe area. We had no idea if we

would ever see our home again.

Escape to Danger

APRIL and Hilall's suburb, far from being "safe", was bombed day and night for six weeks. Then the concrete shelter which we shared with about 250 others, sitting round on mattresses, hugging our grandchildren to us to calm their trembling, was closed on government orders because a shelter of similar design had collapsed on everyone inside it. We couldn't go back to central Baghdad — the army was letting no one in — but Hilall had befriended a Kurdish family in the shelter.

"They have a holiday home in Sulaymaniyah," he told us, "They say we would be welcome there."

"Let the mountains go to hell," said Azziz. "The Kurds will kill anyone to get their freedom. We are Arabs — they will turn on us."

"It is peaceful there," Hilall promised. Sulaymaniyah began to take on the shape of a sanctuary, an earthly paradise. "Please, Azziz," I begged. "It's a chance to survive."

Azziz raised his hands in defeat. "All right. We will go to the Kurds."

We set off for the mountains at 4am on February 24 in three cars, the Kurdish couple and their two small children in the lead, followed by Azziz and me, with Majid and Ali, then April and Hilall with Hosni and his new baby sister, Sabha.

Across Iraq's windswept northern plains, up the twists and

turns of the mountain roads and through beautiful valleys, we at last came to Sulaymaniyah. It still looked the same as we remembered it from holidays. "We will be safe here," I said.

Our Kurdish friends were kind and generous. They spread a nylon sheet on their Persian carpet and served up a hot evening meal. It soon became obvious, though, that the eight of us were too much of a burden for them. They were short of food which, as a matter of honour, had to be shared with us, their guests. On the third night I said to Azziz: "We must get a place of our own."

The city was already full of refugees. All that Azziz and Hilal could find was an air-raid shelter behind a house on a mountainside on the outskirts of the city. Our new landlord, Othman, a nervous, thin-faced Kurd, told me: "I built it for my family during the war with Iran. We were in the front line. Now you are welcome to use it." He was sufficiently desperate for money to risk taking Arabs as tenants.

As I bent down to go through the small metal doorway my heart sank. It was a concrete cell, cold and damp, with no furniture. The "kitchen" was outside: a paraffin heater on a square yard of concrete roofed with galvanized metal sheeting. That night I lay awake, feeling the cold eating into my bones, listening to the rain crashing down, and I cried.

On March 3, the Gulf War ended — and the Peshmerga (the military force fighting for freedom throughout Kurdistan) decided that now, after the Allied attack on Saddam Hussein, was the time to stake their claim to Iraqi Kurdistan.

First they attacked the Iraqi army camp in the mountains just above our shelter. The army surrendered almost at once; their hearts weren't in their job. But the Kurds' real enemies were the security forces: Ba'athist Party Arabs, sent up from Baghdad, who used the army to oppress the people. Day after day for nearly a week there was no let-up in the gunfire as the Kurds attacked the HQ of the secret police and other buildings.

We huddled inside our little room, too terrified to go outside. Many of the Peshmerga were very young and excitable, and they fired their weapons at anyone or anything they saw. Stray bullets hit our walls and rattled down on the kitchen roof. We half expected the door to be kicked in at any time and a stream of bullets to follow.

One evening when the gunfire had stopped I said to Azziz: "I've got to get some air. Let's take a walk."

We went a little way further up the mountain and stared down over the darkened city. All was quiet. Then, as we watched, street lights all over the city centre started to come on. Next we heard gunfire



again. Fearful for the children, we ran back down to our room and found Othman almost jumping for joy.

"We are celebrating," he said. "We are victorious. We have taken Sulaymaniyah and restored the power."

At this news our hearts grew heavier. The more the Kurds humiliated Saddam Hussein, the greater would be his retribution. We had joined one of the world's most persecuted races at one of the most dangerous times in its history.

The Reckoning Begins

AZZIZ and I went into Sulaymaniyah to see the aftermath of the battle. The bodies of Iraqi security officials had been left in the streets for all to see. Some lay

in exactly the positions in which they died, one leaning against a gate, another slumped halfway down a door as he tried to force it open to escape his attackers. Any survivors found in hiding were taken to public squares and passers-by were invited to kill them. There was no shortage of volunteers.

We understood the lust for revenge when we visited the burnt-out headquarters of the Iraqi secret police. Othman had told us many stories about this place; about how hundreds of Kurds had disappeared inside, never to be seen again, and of terrible tortures and murders within its walls. Crowds of Kurds, who had lived in dread of the building, walked silently about the dark, gloomy rooms. The walls were charred and splashed with blood, and some of the prisoners had scratched their names and messages like "Remember me" on the stone.

Othman, in a jubilant mood after listening to Kurdish propaganda broadcasts, told us of victory after victory, but cars and lorries full of Peshmerga were returning to Sulaymaniyah from the battle front, most of them with glum faces. We didn't know what to do for the best.

"We must find a way to Baghdad," I said. Azziz and Hilal asked about this at the local Peshmerga headquarters and the Kurds shook their heads. "The Iraqi army is

coming up from the south like a wall of death," one of them said. "They are not sparing anyone. Give up any hope of getting through."

We listened to the BBC on our radio and learned that the Iraqi army had reached Kirkuk, the oil town only about 100 kilometres from Sulaymaniyah. Azziz and I tried to raise our spirits by walking to a hilltop to admire the peaceful-looking valley below. The sun was warm. I lay dozing in my husband's lap, to be woken by distant explosions.

At first, all we could see were puffs of white smoke alongside the road in the valley. Then a long line of Kurdish refugees, coming from the south and making for Sulaymaniyah, came into view. Two Iraqi army helicopters were pursuing them, darting round the side of the mountain, spitting bullets and rockets into the terrified humanity scattering in panic below them, killing groups at random.

The moving "wall of death" was nearly upon us. Scarcely able to believe what we had seen, we hurried down the hill to reach our cellar and found April and Hilall, unaware of the massacre, sitting outside talking to neighbours, the children running around playing.

I didn't hear the buzz of the approaching helicopter. Suddenly the children were running towards us, screaming, the helicopter swooping down on them like a hungry hawk. The swirling dust and en-

gine-roar engulfed us. The rockets and guns on the helicopter's underside looked close enough to touch, and for a second I glimpsed the impassive faces of the killers at the controls.

We scooped the children up in our arms, ran to our shelter and slammed the door. "Into the corner!" Azziz shouted. "Cover the children!" We threw ourselves on top of them, waiting for the explosion of a rocket, but the noise outside faded. Slowly we recovered our breath.

Decision time was now upon us. We knew that we were only being tolerated by the Peshmerga on the orders of their leaders who, to distance themselves from Saddam Hussein, were keen to acquire a reputation for mercy in the eyes of the outside world. And the Iraqi army was pushing the Kurds back at a terrifying rate. At most, we had four days before Saddam's troops arrived in force. We had to escape again — but where to?

"The only way out," said Othman, "is further up into the mountains." We could then hope to reach the relative safety of Iran.

I couldn't believe that we were going to have to flee from our own people.

Surprise Attack

THE KURDS are so persecuted that they have a saying: "We have no friends but the mountains." To us city-dwellers, the

prospect of surviving in that terrain was daunting.

We piled everything into our two cars again until they looked too loaded to move, and on the night of March 30, 1991, with the Iraqi army only about 30 kilometres away, we headed north out of Sulaymaniyah, joining the tide of refugees. As on the journey up from Baghdad, we had Majid and Ali on our back seat.

Our headlights illuminated a sea of faces etched with misery and panic. I felt exhausted and cold; our car heater wasn't working. At noon next day, when we pulled off the road for a break, I said: "My feet are freezing." While the rest of the family clambered down a slope to find a place to picnic I stood beside our car and balanced myself to pull on my warm boots.

I didn't see the helicopter approaching round the side of the mountain. I just heard Azziz and Hilal shout a warning. Then I felt the scorching heat from tail-flames as a rocket flew just above my head. It landed some 50 metres away and exploded, the blast smashing me against the car.

If there hadn't been enough mud to swallow the rocket whole I would have been killed outright. As it was, I suffered shock, bruises and an arm cut by flying stones. Shaking, I clung to Azziz for comfort. "That was a near one!"

He stroked my hair. "If you had been meant to die, Susan, you

wouldn't be here now. It isn't time for you yet!"

We rejoined the refugee column, watching out warily for prowling helicopters. After edging forward in fits and starts, we reached the town of Arbat and stopped to prepare a meal in the shelter of a fir-tree. A hot boiled potato, a boiled egg and a glass of tea are a luxurious repast when you haven't eaten properly for days. The trouble was that the smell of food brought so many people over. In the end, all I had myself was half a boiled egg.

Our hospitality had attracted the attention of a swarthy, beetle-browed young Kurd named Amin. He wanted to hitch a lift and urged us to take the road to Halabja next. "None of the big vehicles will be using it because it's unsuitable," he said, "but I know it well. You will be able to travel much faster."

Halabja — the world's most tragic example of chemical warfare against civilians! In 1988, during the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein, fearing that the Kurds would collaborate with the Iranians if they advanced into Iraq, bombed Halabja with mustard gas, cyanide and Tabun nerve agent killing, according to official figures, 5,000 people, though Amin told me the true figure was 20,000 or more.

The very mention of this town made me shiver — but anything to quicken our journey to the Iranian border. We accepted

Amin's offer. He guided us along prairie roads and up steep mountainsides. True to his promise, there was less traffic and we kept up a good speed.

On Halabja's outskirts we halted for the night. Next morning, I was the first awake, as usual. I slipped out of the car into the cold, misty quiet of dawn and looked around. After nearly four years the town was still a ruin. I could imagine how it must have been on that awful day: the children playing, the shops crowded, the women busy at home, all of them unaware of the approaching bombers and helicopters. There would hardly have been time to panic. They would simply have fallen where they stood, the mothers and children reaching out for one another as a cloud of death descended on them.

It was one of the saddest places on earth. Not a single complete building had been left standing, just kilometres of bombed-out shells of homes, schools and hospitals. I remembered Othman telling us: "War up here is not just between armies. When the government attacks us it attacks the civilians, because it knows where to find us and we are easy targets."

For a nerve-racking few hours it seemed that we were trapped in this tragic town. Hilall's car was out of petrol. We had left Sulaymani-

yah with full tanks, and although we had covered only about 80 kilometres, the stopping and starting on steep roads had burnt up fuel at an alarming rate.

"We'll give you a tow," I suggested. But Azziz pointed out: "Our car is lighter than theirs. We would never pull them up the mountains."

Eventually Hilall found a lorry driver willing to tow the car to the Tawela plateau, a checkpoint some eight kilometres from the Iranian border, for 300 dinars (about £600 at the official, pre-war exchange rate).

Now, with the thunder of cannon fire behind us growing louder — "The Iraqi army is still coming," said Amin — we left Halabja, crossing wide, open countryside on our way to the next range of mountains, great soaring blue-black peaks, lonely, majestic, and topped with snow. Hilall and April, towed by the lorry, slipped out of sight but we were confident they would catch us up later.

In the distance I could see some blue lakes. "They supply Iraq with water," said Amin. "When we gain independence for Kurdistan we will control them."

He smiled. "That is one of the reasons why they fight us so fiercely."

Away to our left lightning flashed. The wind was getting up again, making the fields ripple and the trees bend. Moving

quickly towards us, the storm clouds sliced off the sunshine. The most perilous stage of our journey was about to begin.

Deadly Switchback

OUR HEARTS dropped as the open road ended and we saw we had to rejoin the main refugee procession. During our detour through Halabja the numbers seemed to have multiplied a thousandfold. There was even a wheelchair in which an old man was obscured under bedding and small children. How had anyone been able to push such a load this far?

The storm turned the narrow mountain roads into quagmires. Azziz had to fight with the steering-wheel and juggle the pedals, the engine shrieking in protest as we either stuck or slid. Several times on sharp corners the car slewed round nearly back to front. I clutched Ali and Majid, holding my door ajar so that I could jump out with them if the car looked like slipping over the edge. Several cars toppled off the road and crashed into the ravine below with all their occupants. I have never been so terrified.

That night, the only parking space we could find was on the very edge of a precipice. The car rocked dangerously every time one of us dared to move. We wedged the wheels with stones to stop it carrying us to our deaths.

Next day the line slithered to a

stop in a dark valley thick with fog. The men wandered off to glean any information they could and reported that the queue stretched to the Iranian border. Unless Iran let more people in, we wouldn't be able to move even a bit. Azziz told me: "They say there are more than a million people sitting on the borders of Iran and Turkey now."

I pulled out from our boot all the clothes I felt sure we wouldn't be needing — a shawl, a pullover, some socks — and gave them to children being carried on the shoulders of their parents; some of the girls wore only flimsy chiffon dresses. Then I huddled in the shelter of the car, feeling guilty as I watched the people outside. Sometimes someone would beg us to let their old mother into the car with us, but we knew we had to say no, however heartbreaking the plea. We had seen other people agreeing to such requests and opening their doors only to find whole families forcing their way in and refusing to get out.

April 4: our wedding anniversary. After the glass of tea from the Kurdish woman who took pity on me, I looked back over my life and couldn't stop crying. No doubt if I had married an Englishman, as Mum had wanted, I would never have had to endure such extremes of hardship, but then I might not have had such a wonderful family. Who knows?

By now we were barely eating

at all, our appetites gone with our strength. Our store of bread and biscuits had run out. All we had left was some rice, a few eggs I was hiding under a pile of towels to keep for April's babies, and a little fat.

Azziz and both the boys were suffering terrible dysentery. Virtually everyone had it. The roadsides were dotted with bright-yellow-and orange-coloured excrement, and the stench was all-pervasive. As Amin said, "The Iraqis are trying to drive us back down from the mountains by poisoning the drinking water."

We saw helicopters circling above the mountains, spraying chemicals into the snow and streams. For some, the poison meant a slow death by dehydration; for others it was like a living death as the body's juices ebbed away, leaving the victims drained and susceptible to the germs which were rife everywhere. Probably the only reason I wasn't suffering was because I had eaten and drunk so little.

Azziz decided to try to find April and Hilall. "Stay with us," I begged him. "You aren't strong enough. They could be far away."

"They will need our help," he insisted. He stumbled and slid down the mountain, asking questions of anyone who understood Arabic. Eventually he found a man who assured him that the lorry towing Hilall's car would

have avoided this narrow road with its hairpin bends. It would have taken a much longer route round the mountains. When Azziz got back to us five hours later, he looked so sick I thought he was about to die.

The Iranians must have let some more refugees in for, edging forward once again, we had reached the Tawela plateau, about one and a half hours' walk from the Iranian border, where we had arranged to meet April and Hilall. There was no sign of them.

Then our car ran out of petrol. We pushed it off the road, out of the way of the procession, under a high bank for protection from the rain. At least we could use it as a shelter, but without petrol we were stranded in this place.

I kept looking for April, Hilall and their babies, but in vain. Having seen so many wrecked vehicles I feared the worst had happened.

Struggle for Survival

IN THE morning Azziz said: "Amin and I are going to walk to the border to see if there's any food or petrol."

They returned late that night and Azziz, looking half-dead with exhaustion, handed me a bag of dry bread. "The Iranians have closed the gates again to keep people out, but they drive through the crowds throwing these bags. It's terrible down there — tens of thousands milling around. This bag hit

me in the chest!" He rubbed himself ruefully.

"Was there any petrol?"

"No, none."

We had now been in the mountains for ten days. Night and day we were always cold, wet and tired. Standing around a smouldering wood fire with a Kurdish family, I caught a glimpse of myself in their car mirror. I couldn't believe that I had grown so haggard. My face was thin and drawn, my blonde hair completely black and oily with dirt.

I saw many terrible sights at Tawela. Once I came across a pack of wild dogs tearing at the dead body of a woman lying in the mud. A man with a stick stopped to help me shoo the snarling creatures away. "They are hungry, too," he shrugged. "Make sure you bury your dead deep."

Another time I was stopped by some people who had gathered around a young couple. The woman was holding a tiny, white-faced girl in her arms, wrapped in a blanket. "Please," they implored me. "This child needs help."

I took the baby from her mother. She was completely limp, her eyes rolling back in her head. "We had no water," the mother told me. "She was thirsty, she drank paraffin."

"How long ago was that?"

"Three days."

I knew it was too late to wash her stomach out or make her vomit. As I stood there in the cold I felt her breathing stop. I gently massaged her chest and put my mouth over hers, but couldn't breathe any life into the tiny body. I passed her to her father. The mother was filled with grief. I felt overwhelmed with despair for ourselves and for everyone around us.

At the car we made tea and Aziz, who seemed a little stronger, said: "I want to go down the mountain with Amin and look for April



and the babies again. I think I now know which road they are on."

Before daybreak on April 9 the two men left us and walked for ten hours. I don't know how Azziz found the strength for such a trip, but thank God he did. They found April and Hilall parked by the main road on the far side of the mountain.

April was frantic as she told her father what had happened. "The lorry driver we paid died through lack of insulin. We have been here ever since. We have no money, no food, and had no idea where you were."

Amin decided the time had come to part from us and search for members of his own family. Azziz, leaving Hilall to arrange for another tow so that he could come and join us, set off back to Tawela with April, two-year-old Hosni and little Sabha, both of whom were sick with dysentery. When

April reached me she collapsed, sobbing, into my arms.

I was relieved to have care of the babies, but frightened by the sight of them. Sabha was a bag of bones. Her eyes were glazed and bloodshot. She slept only fitfully, whimpering from hunger.

Later that night I talked to Azziz

alone. "We've got to get away from here," I said, "or that baby is going to die. We must find petrol. It is our only hope."

On April 11 some Peshmerga came over and asked us what we were doing in Tawela. "We are escaping from Saddam," we said, trying to work out what they wanted to hear. "We are waiting until the time is right to go back to Baghdad."

Their leader looked at us quizically. "Perhaps the time is right now. Negotiations are going on in Baghdad. The Iraqis promise there will be no repercussions if people go back to their homes now."

Go home? We could hardly contain our excitement. Perhaps we weren't finished after all.

But Azziz had spent an entire day searching for petrol without success. Hosni was now passing blood. I heard there was a doctor working in a tent on the next mountain and I went to see him. His supplies of medicines had run out.

Emaciated little Sabha was growing weaker every hour and refused to take her bottle any more. She wasn't strong enough to replace her body fluid. I sat in the car with her in my arms, just waiting for her to stop breathing and leave us.

Race Against Time

HILALL seemed very strong compared with the rest of us. He de-



voted a day to hunting for petrol and reported that evening: "At the bottom of the mountain the Peshmerga are selling black-market petrol" — my heart skipped a beat at this news — "but they are asking a lot of money."

"I don't care what it costs," I said. "Take our whole suitcase of cash, otherwise Sabha will be dead before we can get back to civilization."

Early next morning Azziz and Hilall bought 16 jerry cans for 1350 dinars (then £2700). Dragging them up to the plateau took until noon. The sound of the engines was like music to us. We sped off for Sulaymaniyah, horns honking to clear people out of the way.

April was holding Sabha in the back of their car. She was now unconscious, her little body completely limp.

The roads which had been so full the week before were deserted and less slippery, some of the mud having dried. Azziz stood on the accelerator, throwing our car round corners. I covered my eyes and prayed.

Every kilometre or so we had to stop for a Peshmerga checkpoint where they demanded to know where we were going, and why. Hilall did the talking, in Kurdish. "We were trapped in the mountains escaping Saddam Hussein's army," he said, "but now he has declared a truce and we are going back."

Each stop seemed to take an age. There were tension-filled moments as they looked through our papers in silence, seeming to turn the pages with deliberate slowness as if trying to crack us into admitting some crime. We kept showing them Sabha and she worked like a passport for us; the guerrillas could see how close she was to death. They relented and waved us on.

Then at Arbat we started to encounter Iraqi checkpoints and Azziz took over the talking. Now we became unfortunate Arab holiday-makers who had been in the north when the Kurds started to wage war on the Iraqis. Once again dying Sabha speeded our passage.

The journey to Sulaymaniyah, which had taken so many days when we were heading out, lasted only two and a half hours on the way back. We headed straight for the hospital. During the Kurds' battle for the town and the recapture by the government, the hospital had become a shell. Every window seemed to have been blown out. But we could see people inside. We ran in with Sabha and I grabbed a nurse. "Our baby needs a drip." The woman wasn't interested. "We have nothing here," she said.

I saw a doctor in the distance and shouted to him: "This baby is dying." He came over and looked at Sabha. "We have been in the mountains for three

weeks," I explained. "She is dehydrated."

"We'll put her on a drip," he said, "but we need boiled water and we haven't any power."

"Give us some water and some paraffin for our stove and we will boil it!" The doctor broke into a smile. Within minutes Azziz was heating water outside on the pavement for Sabha and other patients.

We all stood round Sabha's bed as they rigged up the drip. Her breathing at last appeared to ease and she seemed to be sleeping properly. Leaving April to keep bedside vigil we drove on to Othman's house, not knowing if we would find him alive. We turned into his road and Othman, his wife and children ran to greet us.

"Come quickly into the house before we attract attention," he said, his joy at meeting us again quickly replaced by his old caution about Arab guests.

That night we were back in our cellar, sipping hot tea and soup. The doctor at the hospital had given us medicines for Azziz and the children. We were warm, dry and quiet. It was heaven.

After three days on the hospital drip, Sabha was strong enough to travel. On April 20, nearly two months after leaving Baghdad, we set off.

As we entered Baghdad, Hilall and April turned off towards their home in the suburbs. They were

NEXT MONTH

M.R.Pai, Champion of the Consumer

For this cool-headed consumer activist, getting justice for the common man is a way of life

Every Man's Worst Sexual Fear

Experts have now come up with a variety of treatments for curing impotence

Caught in a Flooding Mine

One hundred and twenty metres below the earth's surface, nine men were trapped behind the rising waters. Two miners dared to go back to rescue them

Book Section

Tales of a Country Vet

When a young vet moves to a rural area, he discovers that a calloused handshake is a firm guarantee, and that healing a sick animal — a sometimes messy undertaking — improves the human condition as well

IN READER'S DIGEST FOR OCTOBER

running low on petrol and feared they would not make it all the way. In fact, they ran out of fuel half an hour from their house and had to be towed by a passing tractor.

The city centre was quiet and empty. Everywhere houses and shops were boarded up. As we approached our street I began to feel nervous. Supposing the house had been bombed or ransacked? We reached the panelled gates. They were bolted on the inside. Somebody must be in there, but who?

I played our family call-sign on the doorbell. The gates flew open and John and Peter, both safely out of the army, threw their arms around us. Their children milled around our legs.

I couldn't believe that my whole family was alive. They had half-believed we must be dead. When the Gulf War ended they went out to April's house to find us, but no one knew where we'd gone.

John took charge of me. He ran me a bath, my first in months. I scrubbed and scrubbed myself,

then went to bed. What a wonderful feeling to descend on to a soft mattress after all those nights curled up in the car. What utter luxury it was to feel safe in my own home again.

The ordeal in the mountains had taken its toll. Susan Francis writes: "Every nerve in my body seemed to be wound so tight it was ready to snap. I found myself crying for no particular reason. I didn't want to go out and face the world. I felt I might soon go mad."

Her doctor diagnosed a nervous breakdown, and Azziz suggested she should return to Britain to recover her strength. "How can I leave my family?" she asked. But in the end she reluctantly agreed.

After tearful farewells, Susan arrived in Britain in June 1991, to be joined two months later by Azziz. They now live in London, but some of their family remain in Iraq. "I don't suppose I will ever completely recover from those terrible years," says Susan. "But at least I have found some peace."



Sharp Answer

DESPERATELY trying to stimulate discussion on Thackeray's dauntingly long *Vanity Fair*, my English professor at university posed the question, "What is significant about the beginning and the end of the novel?"

"There's about this much in between," a weary student replied, holding his thumb and forefinger about eight centimetres apart.

— Kristin Fitzgerald, Canada